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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL OSCE TU

SUBJECT: DIYANET SEES POPE'S VISIT TO TURKEY AS OPPORTUNITY
FOR RECONCILIATION

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1C. ISTANBUL 1749

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice G. Weiner for reasons 1.4(b),
(d)

1.(SBU) Summary: The GOT sees Pope Benedict XVI's November 28-December 1 visit to Turkey as a chance to heal wounds and improve relations between Christians and Muslims. Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs (the "Diyanet") is optimistic that the Pope's initial public remarks will smooth the controversy that arose out of his September remarks in Regensburg, Germany, and will set a positive tone for the remainder of the trip. While the GOT and Vatican Embassy are downplaying the possibility of disruptive demonstrations, their preparations make it clear they are taking no chances. Demonstrations on some scale are indeed likely. This third official Papal visit to Turkey comes at a time of rising nationalism and anti-Western sentiment among Turks. Both Turkey and the Vatican appear ready to capitalize on this opportunity to help advance inter-religious dialogue and reduce simmering tensions between Christian and Muslim communities, assuming disruptive events do not get in the way. End summary.

The Pope's Itinerary

12. (U) Pope Benedict XVI will begin his first visit to a predominantly Muslim country on November 28 in Ankara, where he will visit Ataturk's mausoleum (a requirement for all VIP visitors), pay a courtesy visit to President Sezer, meet with Diyanet President Ali Bardakoglu, and then give a joint press conference with Bardakoglu. The Diyanet meeting will reportedly also include ten cardinals, five Diyanet officials, three Turkish muftis, and the President of Turkey's Supreme Council for Religious Matters. The Pope also will speak to the diplomatic corps at the Vatican Embassy.

13. (U) After leaving Ankara, the Pope will begin his private, unofficial visit, according to Vatican Embassy First Secretary Monsignor Christophe El-Kassis. On November 29,

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the Pope will visit with Catholic groups in Izmir, and then celebrate mass with approximately 2,000 worshipers at Ephesus, where by tradition the home of the Virgin Mary is located. After the mass, the Pope will travel to Istanbul.

¶4. (U) In Istanbul, the Pope will participate in a "prayer visit" with Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew II, and then attend a Byzantine mass led by the Patriarch at the patriarchal church of St. George. Following the mass, the Pope will give a speech and then sign a joint declaration with the Patriarch. The event will mark a significant rapprochement between the two churches, which split in 1054 in what is known as the "Great Schism." The Pope will also visit the Church of Holy Wisdom "Hagia Sophia", now a museum, and meet with Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul Mesrob II at the Armenian cathedral. He is also scheduled to meet the Syro-Orthodox Patriarch and the Chief Rabbi of Turkey.

¶5. (U) The MFA and Vatican Embassy have both downplayed the fact that PM Erdogan will not be in Turkey during the visit. MFA Protocol Department Head Hasan Asan told us that prior to the announcement of the Pope's visit the PM had plans to attend the November 28-29 NATO Summit in Riga. Vatican Embassy First Secretary El-Kassis told us there is no symbolic slight because President Sezer will receive the Pope as Head of State.

¶6. (U) Diyanet Vice President Gormez told us the visit's significance is evident from the intense press attention his program is attracting. Vatican Embassy and the GOT expect approximately 2000 accredited journalists and accompanying staff to travel to Turkey to cover the visit.

Diyanet Optimistic That Papal Visit Will Help Heal Wounds

ANKARA 00006447 002 OF 002

¶7. (SBU) Our GOT contacts expect that the Pope's November 28 public remarks following his meeting with Diyanet President Bardakoglu will set a positive tone for the trip. Bardokoglu fiercely criticized the Pope's controversial remarks made during a September speech in Regensburg, Germany. According to Bardakoglu, the Pope's quotation of Emperor Manuel II Paleologos of the Byzantine Empire showed an attitude that "fuels division and lack of mutual trust, (and) is seriously threatening world peace." Although the Pope later expressed regret that offense was taken at his speech, "the healing is not complete, and any slightly negative message could disrupt a very sensitive Turkish society," Diyanet Vice President Gormez told us. Gormez expressed optimism, however, that the Pope will deliver a positive, healing message at the outset of his visit.

Possible Disruptions Downplayed

¶8. (C) The GOT and the Vatican Embassy have not ruled out possible demonstrations. Both believe that ultra-nationalist groups may organize protests in an attempt to ignite tensions that might hinder Turkey's EU membership process. Many of our NGO contacts echoed these sentiments. Human Rights NGO Mazlum-Der Vice Chair Ayhan Bilgen told us in a November 5 meeting that he believes that a diverse array of nationalists could try to use the visit to drive a wedge between Turkey and the EU. Bilgen does not expect, however, that these groups will be able to pull together a large-scale, organized demonstration.

¶9. (C) Security remains a priority. MFA's Asan told us that the GOT is closely cooperating with the Vatican advance teams, which have already visited Turkey twice. Vatican Embassy's El-Kassis told us that since the controversy regarding the Pope's September remarks in Germany, the GOT has stepped up its already good cooperation. El-Kassis said

his mission was reassured when the Turkish police recently sent 150 police to secure the embassy during an 80-person demonstration.

¶10. (C) Comment: Although there have been two prior papal visits to Turkey -- in 1968 and 1979 -- this visit comes at a particularly sensitive moment, when rising nationalism is fueling anti-Western sentiment among Turks. The public's support for EU membership stands at an all-time-low, and opposition to the West at an all-time-high. Moreover, Turkey's EU candidacy is approaching a delicate point, with the possible suspension of a number of *acquis* chapters. While the Pope's visit originally may have been centered on outreach to the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, his Regensburg remarks shifted the focus to repairing the rent between the Christian and Muslim communities. A successful papal visit would open the way for both Turkey and the Vatican to move beyond the Pope's remarks, and could help heal two "schisms" by initiating greater dialogue among religions -- Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox, Christian and Muslim. End comment.

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